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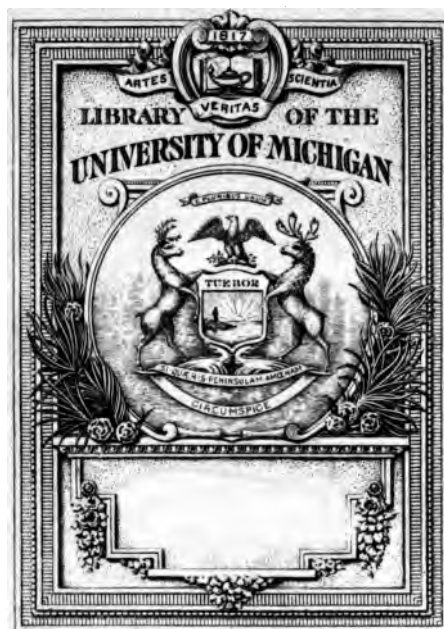
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Maryland Historical Society ... Benjamin Banneker



MEMOIR

OF

BENJAMIN BANNEKER,

READ BEFORE THE

MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

AT THE

MONTHLY MEETING, MAY 1, 1845,

BY

JOHN H. ^{Hayden} ^{B. Bannal} LATROBE, ESQ.

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PUBLISHED UNDER DIRECTION OF THE SOCIETY.  
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ROOMS OF THE MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 1 May, 1845.

At the Monthly Meeting of the Society, held at its Rooms on the 1st May, *John H. B. Latrobe, Esq.* read an extremely interesting Memoir of *Benjamin Banneker*, a coloured native of MARYLAND, who resided at Ellicotts Mills during the latter part of the last century and beginning of the present, and was remarkable for his general intelligence and mathematical acquirements.

Upon motion of *Chas. H. Pitts*, Mr. Latrobe was requested to furnish a copy of the Memoir for publication and preservation among the Archives of the Society.

R. CARY LONG,

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J. McHENRY BOYD,

Committee on the Library.

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MEMOIR

OF

BENJAMIN BANNEKER.

A FEW words may be necessary to explain why a memoir of a free man of colour, formerly a resident of Maryland, is deemed of sufficient interest to be presented to the Historical Society.

There are no questions relating to our country of more interest than those connected with her coloured population; an interest which has been increasing, year after year, until it has acquired its present absorbing character. Time and space prohibit an inquiry into the causes of this. It is sufficient to state the fact. The presence of this population in the States where slavery exists modifies their institutions in important particulars, and affects in a greater or less degree the character of the dominant race. For this reason alone, the memoir of a coloured man, who has distinguished himself in an abstruse science, by birth a Marylander, claims consideration from those who have associated to collect and preserve facts and records relating to the men and deeds of the past. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania has, no doubt, carefully gathered all that could be obtained to illustrate the life and scientific character of Rittenhouse. In presenting to the Historical Society of Maryland a memoir of Banneker, the little that is known of one who followed, under every disadvantage, in the footsteps of the philosopher of our sister State, is collected and preserved.

There is another reason why this memoir is appropriate. Maryland is the only State in the Union that has clearly indicated her policy in regard to her coloured population. She looks to their gradual and voluntary removal as the only means of solving the difficult problem which their presence involves. To aid in this removal, she appropriated, in 1831, the large sum of \$200,000; not in the expectation that this sum would transport them all from this country to Africa; but that, by means of it, a community of freemen capable of self-support and self-government might be established there, that would be so attractive ultimately to the coloured people here, as to produce an emigration, at the proper cost of the emigrants them-

selves, based on the same motives, and as great in amount as the emigration from Europe to America. This policy and its results must enter largely into the history of Maryland. Its success must mainly depend upon the ability and skill of the emigrants to found such a nation as will accomplish the end in view: and this in its turn depends on the oft mooted question as to the comparative intellect of the two races, the white and the coloured. To decide this, facts are important; and not one more conclusive exists than the abilities and character of Benjamin Banneker.

Whether, therefore, as a matter of mere curiosity only, or as a fact from which important inferences for present action are to be drawn, a memoir of the individual in question should possess interest for our association.

Benjamin Banneker was born in Baltimore County, near the village of Ellicotts Mills, in the year 1732. His father was a native African, and his mother the child of natives of Africa; so that to no admixture of the blood of the white man was he indebted for his peculiar and extraordinary abilities. His father was a slave when he married; but his wife, who was a free woman and possessed of great energy and industry, very soon afterwards purchased his freedom. Banneker's mother was named Morton before her marriage, and belonged to a family remarkable for its intelligence. When upwards of 70, she was still very active; and it is remembered of her, that at this advanced age she made nothing of catching her chickens when wanted by running them down. A nephew of her's, Greenbury Morton, was a person of some note, notwithstanding his complexion. Prior to 1809, free people of colour, possessed of a certain property qualification, voted in Maryland. In this year a law was passed restricting the right of voting to free white males. Morton was ignorant of the law till he offered to vote at the polls in Baltimore County; and it is said that when his vote was refused, he addressed the crowd in a strain of true and passionate eloquence, which kept the audience, that the election had assembled for him, in breathless attention while he spoke.

The joint labour of the elder Banneker and his wife enabled them to purchase a small farm, which continued after their death in the possession of their son. The farm was a tract of one hundred acres, the half of a larger tract called "Stout," and was conveyed by Richard Gist to Robert Bannaky, as the name was then spelt, and Benjamin Bannaky his son, (who was then but five years old) on the 10th March, 1737, for the consideration of 7,000 lbs. of tobacco. At the date of Banneker's birth, his parents, although within ten miles of Baltimore, lived almost in a wilderness. In 1727, five years before, the site of Baltimore was the farm of John Flemming, on which, in that year, the legislature authorized a town to be laid out. The view of this town, in 1754, with which we are all familiar, does not exhibit more than twenty houses, straggling over the eminences on the right bank of Jones' Falls. In 1740, Baltimore had been surrounded with a board fence to protect it against the Indians. All this is proper to be remembered, in order that the difficulties against which Banneker had to struggle may be fairly understood. In 1732, Elkridge landing was of more consequence than Baltimore.

When Benjamin was old enough he was employed to assist his parents

in their labour. This was at an early age, when his destiny seemed nothing better than that of a child of poor and ignorant free negroes, occupying a few acres of land in a remote and thinly peopled neighbourhood,—a destiny which certainly, at this day, is not of very brilliant promise, and which, at the time in question, must have been gloomy enough. In the intervals of toil, and when he was approaching, or had attained, manhood, he was sent to an obscure and distant country school, which he attended until he had acquired a knowledge of reading and writing, and had advanced in arithmetic as far as “Double Position.” In all matters beyond these rudiments of learning he was his own instructor. On leaving school he was obliged to labour for years, almost uninterruptedly, for his support. But his memory being retentive, he lost nothing of the little education he had acquired. On the contrary, although utterly destitute of books, he amplified and improved his stock of arithmetical knowledge by the operation of his mind alone. He was an acute observer of every thing that he saw, or which took place around him in the natural world, and he sought with avidity information from all sources of what was going forward in society; so that he became gradually possessed of a fund of general knowledge, which it was difficult to find among those even who were far more favoured by opportunity and circumstances than he was. At first his information was a subject of remark and wonder among his illiterate neighbours only; but by degrees the reputation of it spread through a wider circle; and Benjamin Banneker, still a young man, came to be thought of as one, who could not only perform all the operations of mental arithmetic with extraordinary facility, but exercise a sound and discriminating judgment upon men and things. It was at this time, when he was about thirty years of age, that he contrived and made a clock, which proved an excellent time-piece. He had seen a watch, but not a clock, such an article not yet having found its way into the quiet and secluded valley in which he lived. The watch was therefore his model. It took him a good while to accomplish this feat; his great difficulty, as he often used to say, being to make the hour, minute and second hands correspond in their motions. But the clock was finished at last, and raised still higher the credit of Banneker in his neighbourhood as an ingenious man, as well as a good arithmetician.

The making of the clock was an important matter, for it was probably owing to the fame of it, that the Ellicott family, who had just commenced a settlement where Ellicotts Mills now stands, were induced to seek him out. Well educated, and having great aptness for the useful mechanics, they were the men of all others, able to understand and appreciate the character and abilities of Banneker, and they continued during his life his firm and zealous friends.

As already stated, the basis of Banneker's arithmetical knowledge was obtained from the school book into which he had advanced as far as Double Position: but in 1787, Mr. George Ellicott lent him Mayer's Tables, Ferguson's Astronomy and Leadbeater's Lunar Tables. Along with these books were some astronomical instruments. Mr. Ellicott was accidentally prevented from giving Banneker any information as to the use of either books or instruments at the time he lent them: but before he again met

him, and the interval was a brief one, Banneker was independent of any instruction, and was already absorbed in the contemplation of the new world which was thus opened to his view. From this time, the study of astronomy became the great object of his life, and for a season he almost disappeared from the sight of his neighbours. He was unmarried, and was the sole occupant of a cabin on the lot of ground already mentioned. His parents had died at a date which is not remembered; before the period, however, to which we now particularly refer. He was still obliged to labor for his bread; but by contracting his wants he made little serve him, and he thus obtained leisure to devote to his books. His favourite time for study was night, when he could look out upon the planets whose story he was reading, and whose laws he was gradually but surely mastering. During the hours of darkness Banneker was at his labours, and shutting himself up in his house, when not obliged to toil out of doors with his hands, he slept during the day. In this way he lost the reputation for industry which he had acquired in early life; and those who saw but little of him in his field, and who found him sleeping when they visited his house, set him down as a lazy fellow, who would come to no good, and whose old age would disappoint the promise of his youth. There was a season, when this estimate of him by the ignorant among his neighbours, led to attempts to impose on him, and at times gave him serious inconvenience. But as people came to understand him, his character was restored most honourably. A memorandum in his hand-writing, dated December 18th, 1790, states "——— informed me that —— stole my horse and great coat, and that the said —— intended to murder me when opportunity presented. —— gave me a caution to let no one come into my house after dark." The names of the parties were originally written in full; but they were afterwards carefully cancelled, as though Banneker had reflected, that it was wrong to leave an unauthenticated assertion on record against an individual, which might prejudice him, if incorrect, by the mere fact that it had been made.

Very soon after the possession of the books already mentioned had drawn Banneker's attention to astronomy, he determined to compile an almanac, that being the most familiar use that occurred to him of the information he had acquired. Of the labour of the work, few of those can form an estimate who would at this day commence such a task, with all the assistance afforded by accurate tables and well digested rules. Banneker had no such aid: and it is narrated as a well known fact, that he commenced and had advanced far in the preparation of the logarithms necessary for his purpose, when he was furnished with a set of tables by Mr. George Ellicott. About this time he began the record of his calculations, which is still in existence, and is left with the Society for examination. A memorandum contained in it thus corrects an error in Fergusson's Astronomy. "It appears to me that the wisest of men may at times be in error: for instance, Dr. Fergusson informs us that when the sun is within 12° of either node at the time of full, that the moon will be eclipsed: but I find, according to his method of projecting a lunar eclipse, there will be none by the above elements, and yet the sun is within $11^{\circ} 46' 11''$ of the moon's ascending node. *But the moon being in her apogee prevents the appearance of this eclipse.*"

Another memorandum makes the following corrections. "Errors that ought to be corrected in my Astronomical Tables are these; 2 vol. Leadbeater, p. 204, when $\frac{1}{2}$ anomaly is $4^{\circ} 30'$, the equation $3^{\circ} 38' 41''$ ought to have been $3^{\circ} 28' 41''$. In $\frac{1}{2}$ equation, page 155, the logarithm of his distance from $\odot$ ought to have been 6 in the second place from the index, instead of 7, that is from the time that his anomaly is $3^{\circ} 24'$ until it is $4^{\circ} 0'$." Both Fergusson and Leadbeater would probably have looked incredulous, had they been informed, that their laboured works had been reviewed and corrected by a free negro in the then almost unheard of valley of the Patapsco. The first Almanac which Banneker prepared, fit for publication, was for the year 1792. By this time his acquirements had become generally known, and among others who took an interest in him was James McHenry, Esq. Mr. McHenry wrote a letter to Goddard and Angell, then the Almanac publishers in Baltimore, which was probably the means of procuring the publication of the first Almanac. It contains a short account of Banneker, and is inserted as the most appropriate preface that could have been furnished for the work. Mr. McHenry's letter does equal honour to his heart and understanding. A copy of the Almanac is presented here, with to the Society, in the name of Mrs. Ellicott, the widow of George Ellicott, Banneker's steadfast friend.

In their editorial notice, Messrs. Goddard and Angell say, "they feel gratified in the opportunity of presenting to the public, through their press, what must be considered as an extraordinary effort of genius—a complete and accurate Ephemeris for the year 1792, calculated by a sable descendant of Africa," &c. And they further say, that "they flatter themselves that a philanthropic public, in this enlightened era, will be induced to give their patronage and support to this work, not only on account of its intrinsic merits, (it having met the approbation of several of the most distinguished astronomers of America, particularly the celebrated Mr. Rittenhouse,) but from similar motives to those which induced the editors to give this calculation the preference, the ardent desire of drawing modest merit from obscurity and controverting the long established illiberal prejudice against the blacks."

The motive alluded to by Goddard and Angell in the extract just quoted, of doing justice to the intellect of the coloured race, was a prominent object with Banneker himself; and the only occasions when he overstepped a modesty which was his peculiar characteristic, were when he could, by so doing, "controvert the long established illiberal prejudice against the blacks." We find him, therefore, sending a copy of his first Almanac to Mr. Jefferson, then Secretary of State under General Washington, saying in the letter that accompanied it, "although you may have the opportunity of perusing it after its publication, yet I chose to send it to you in manuscript previous thereto, that you might not only have an earlier inspection, but that you might also view it in my own hand-writing."

To the letter from which the above is an extract, and which will be found at length, appended to this memoir, Mr. Jefferson made the following reply:

PHILADELPHIA, Aug. 30, 1791.

SIR,—I thank you sincerely for your letter of the 19th instant, and for the Almanac it contained. Nobody wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren talents equal to those of the other colours of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing only to the degraded condition of their existence both in Africa and America. I can add with truth that no one wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced for raising the condition both of their body and mind to what it ought to be, as fast as the imbecility of their present existence, and other circumstances which cannot be neglected, will admit. I have taken the liberty of sending your Almanac to Monsieur de Condorcet, Secretary of the Academy of Sciences at Paris, and member of the Philanthropic Society; because I considered it a document to which your whole colour had a right for their justification against the doubts which have been entertained of them.

I am, with great esteem, sir, your most obedient servant,

THO. JEFFERSON.

MR. BENJAMIN BANNEKER, near Ellicotts' lower Mills, Baltimore County.

When he published his first Almanac, Banneker was fifty-nine years old, and had high respect paid to him by all the scientific men of the country, as one whose colour did not prevent his belonging to the same class, so far as intellect went, with themselves. After the adoption of the constitution in 1789, commissioners were appointed to run the lines of the District of Columbia, the ten miles square now occupied by the seat of government, and then called the "Federal territory." The commissioners invited Banneker to be present at the runnings, and treated him with much consideration. On his return, he used to say of them, that "they were a very civil set of gentlemen, who had overlooked his complexion on account of his attainments, and had so far honoured him as to invite him to be seated at their table; an honour," he added, "which he had thought fit to decline, and requested that a side table might be provided for him."

Banneker continued to calculate and publish his Almanacs until 1802, and the folio already referred to and now before the Society, contains the calculations clearly copied, and the figures used by him in his work. The hand-writing, it will be seen, is very good and remarkably distinct, having a practised look, although evidently that of an old man, who makes his letters and figures slowly and carefully. His letter to Mr. Jefferson, in the Appendix, gives a very good idea of his style of composition and his ability as a writer. The title of the Almanac is here transcribed at length, as a matter of curious interest at this later day. If it claims little of the art and elegance and wit of the Almanacs of Punch or of Hood, it is nevertheless, considering its history, a far more surprising production.

"Benjamin Banneker's Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia and Maryland Almanac and Ephemeris for the year of our Lord 1792, being Bissextile or leap year, and the sixteenth year of American Independence, which commenced July 4, 1776. Containing the motions of the sun and moon, the true places and aspects of the planets, the rising and setting of the sun, and

the rising, setting and southing, place and age, of the moon, &c. The Lunations, Conjunctions, Eclipses, Judgment of the Weather, Festivals, and remarkable days." Thus much is Banneker's: then follow Goddard and Angell; "also several useful tables and valuable receipts—various selections from the common place-book of the Kentucky Philosopher, an American sage; with interesting and entertaining essays in prose and verse—the whole comprising a greater, more pleasing and useful variety than any book of the *kind* and *price* in North America."

Besides his aptitude for mechanics, and his ability as a mathematician, Banneker was an acute observer, whose active mind was constantly receiving impulses from what was taking place around him. Many instances of this are to be found in the record of his calculations, which he seems to have used occasionally as a common-place book. For instance, under date of the 27th August, 1797, he writes: "Standing at my door I heard the discharge of a gun, and in four or five seconds of time, after the discharge, the small shot came rattling about me, one or two of which struck the house; which plainly demonstrates that the velocity of sound is greater than that of a cannon bullet." It must have been a philosophic mind, which observing the fact as here stated, drew from it the correct conclusion, and then recorded it in appropriate terms as a simple and beautiful illustration of the law of nature, with which, in all probability, he first became acquainted through its means.

Again on the 23d December, 1790, he writes: "About 3 o'clock, A. M. I heard the sound and felt the shock like unto heavy thunder. I went out but could not observe any cloud above the horizon. I therefore conclude it must be a great earthquake in some part of the globe." A similar conclusion from the same facts was drawn by a greater man than Banneker near eighteen hundred years before,* and recorded to be commented on in after ages.

Nor was Banneker's observation confined to matters of a philosophical character. There is evidence in the memoranda of his record book that natural history was equally interesting to him. The following, independent of its connection with the subject of our memoir, possesses general interest as an authentic statement by an eye-witness of a curious fact in entomology. In April, 1800, he writes: "The first great locust year that I can remember was 1749. I was then about seventeen years of age, when thousands of them came and were creeping up the trees and bushes. I then imagined they came to eat and destroy the fruit of the earth, and would occasion a famine in the land. I therefore began to kill and destroy them, but soon saw that my labour was in vain, and therefore gave over my pretension. Again in the year 1766, which is seventeen years after their first appearance, they made a second, and appeared to me to be full as numerous as the first. I then, being about thirty-four years of age, had more sense than to endeavour to destroy them, knowing they were not so pernicious to the fruit of the earth as I imagined they would be. Again in the year 1783, which was seventeen years since their second appearance to me, they made their third; and they may be expected again in the year 1800,

* Pliny.

which is seventeen years since their third appearance to me. So that if I may venture to express it, their periodical return is seventeen years: but they, like the comets, make but a short stay with us. The female has a sting in her tail as sharp and hard as a thorn, with which she perforates the branches of the trees, and in the holes lays eggs. The branch soon dies and falls. Then the egg, by some occult cause immerses a great depth into the earth, and there continues for the space of seventeen years as aforesaid."

"I like to forget to inform, that if their lives are short they are merry. They begin to sing or make a noise from first they come out of the earth till they die. The hindermost part rots off, and it does not appear to be any pain to them, for they still continue on singing till they die."

Again, there is the following record of a fact in natural history: "In the month of January, 1797, on a pleasant day for the season, I observed my honey bees to be out of their hives, and they seemed very busy, all but one hive. Upon examination I found all the bees had evacuated this hive, and left not a drop of honey behind them. On the 9th February ensuing, I killed the neighbouring hives of bees, on a special occasion, and found a great quantity of honey, considering the season—which I imagine the stronger had violently taken from the weaker, and the weaker had pursued them to their home, resolved to be benefitted by their labour or die in the contest."

The last extract we shall make from the record book is one which indicates a relish for the beautiful in nature, as well by his undertaking to record a description of what he saw, as by the language which he uses. The extract is from the last pages of the book, when he was in his seventy-first year. His writing is still distinct, but the letters have lost their firmness, and shew that his hand trembled as it held the pen.

"1803, Feb. 2d. In the morning part of the day, there arose a very dark cloud, followed by snow and hail, a flash of lightning and loud thunder crack; and then the storm abated until afternoon, when another cloud arose at the same point, viz: the north-west, with a beautiful shower of snow. But what beautified the snow was the brightness of the sun, which was near setting at the time. I looked for the rainbow, or rather snowbow, but I think the snow was of too dense a nature to exhibit the representation of the bow in the cloud."

"N. B. The above was followed by very cold weather for a few days."

Soon after he obtained the books already mentioned as having been lent him by Mr. George Ellicott, and became engrossed in his new studies, he found that it was necessary to have more time at his disposal than he had previously enjoyed, and also to be released from some cares that had occasionally annoyed him. The land on which he lived was divided into several small tenements, the rent of which contributed to Banneker's support. The collection of this rent was a source of constant trouble and vexation. His tenants quarrelled with him; they refused to pay him: if he insisted on payment, they annoyed him in a dozen different ways, until at last, saying that "it was better to die of hunger than of anger," he determined to sell his land for an annuity. He therefore made a careful calculation of

the chances of his life upon such data as he could obtain, and the Ellicott family bought the land upon the terms proposed by him. In the same volume that contains his Almanacs in manuscript is an account current, by which it would seem that the annuity was £12, Maryland currency. This arrangement gave him the time he wanted, and the annuity, with the proceeds of his Almanac, mainly supported him until he died. It is stated, that the only imperfect calculation which Banneker ever made, was the calculation for this annuity. He lived eight years longer than the time prescribed. Other persons in later days have done the same, where the insurance office has undertaken the calculation, so that Banneker's case is not a remarkable one in this respect. *Notwithstanding the sale of the land he still resided on it and, as it would seem from a memorandum in his record book, he continued to labour on it a portion of his time. On the 24th April, 1802, he speaks of being in the field, holling for corn—and among the last entries made by him are charges for pasturage.

In 1804, Banneker died, in the 72d year of his age, and his remains are deposited, without a stone to mark the spot, near the dwelling which he occupied during his life-time. His land, of course, went at once into the possession of the Messrs. Ellicotts, and his personal property was disposed of by him to his friends before he died. There is no evidence that he made a will, or that there was administration on his estate, to be found in the records of the Orphan's Court, which have been examined with a view of adding to the few materials still existing for his biography. There are several persons now living who recollect Banneker well, and from these Mr. Benjamin H. Ellicott, of Baltimore, has collected the memoranda from which, with the materials furnished by his record book, this sketch has been prepared. The following is an extract from Mr. Ellicott's letter in regard to Banneker.

"During the whole of his long life he lived respectably and much esteemed by all who became acquainted with him, but more especially by those who could fully appreciate his genius and the extent of his acquirements. Although his mode of life was regular and extremely retired, living alone, having never married,—cooking his own victuals and washing his own clothes, and scarcely ever being absent from home, yet there was nothing misanthropic in his character, for a gentleman who knew him, thus speaks of him. 'I recollect him well. He was a brave looking pleasant man, with something very noble in his appearance. His mind was evidently much engrossed in his calculations; but he was glad always to receive the visits which we often paid to him.' Another of Mr. Ellicott's correspondents writes as follows: 'When I was a boy, I became very much inter-

* The deed from Banneker to the Ellicotts, Jonathan, Elias, George and John, is dated on the 10th March, 1799, and purports to convey 72 acres of a tract of land called "Stout" for the sum of £180 Maryland currency—which seems inconsistent with the idea of the annuity mentioned in the text. But the positive information of living witnesses, and the entries in the record book, kept by Banneker, seem to establish the fact that the annuity was paid, prior to the date of the deed, the execution of which was perhaps postponed or neglected for many years after the agreement was made. A deed for 28 acres of the tract, the balance of the 100 acres, had been previously executed to Greenbury Morton, a cousin of Banneker's on the mother's side.

